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Plume cleanup orders issued

Contamination forced closure of 6 water wells

By EMILY SACHS
Staff Writer

Moving an inch a day for as much as a half century, a plume of underground contaminants has carved a damaging southeast route through the sands below Rialto and Colton.

The perchlorate has been least merciful to municipal water wells, six of which have been shut down since 1997. Four of those closed earlier this year.

But despite five years of work, state water officials aren't much closer to a method of stopping the pollution.

The Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board on Thursday sent cleanup orders to two former industrial businesses that are believed to be responsible.

But evidence is scant, much of it based on historical research.

See PLUME/A5

Plume

Continued from A1

And representatives for the businesses, defunct flare manufacturer West Coast Loading Co. and a former B.F. Goodrich military propellant researcher, said recently they aren't convinced that it is proof.

"We're pretty confident," said Kurt Berchtold, assistant executive officer for the water board. "But it doesn't mean we're not going to work to get information on other sources."

Among those frustrated with the delay is state Sen. Nell Soto, D-Ontario, who called a meeting on Friday with the water quality officials to find out why little has happened in the five years they have been aware of the plume.

During the two-hour meeting, Soto said she got only some of the answers she demanded.

Soto and the others will meet in a week or so for an update. If more answers are not forthcoming, she will call a state Senate hearing to investigate.

The only thing Soto said she is convinced of is that the cleanup responsibility lies fully in the hands of whoever has polluted the water.

"They have to clean it up. We cannot afford to have any more wells closed," she said. "We're not going to allow the polluters to get away scot-free."

Perchlorate facts

The suspected north Rialto plume has spread as much as

five miles southwest since the 1950s, when the flare company operated on a 160-acre site off Locust Avenue.

In 1997, perchlorate levels in nearby wells operated by the West San Bernardino Water District were discovered to be as high as 273 parts per billion.

Other wells downstream have since shown levels far below that, but still higher than the four parts per billion that were recently determined to be safe according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

One part per billion is about the concentration of one drop in an Olympic-sized pool.

Perchlorate has been linked with thyroid problems in babies and young children. The chemical, which mimics the chloride found in table salt, is undetectable except through testing.

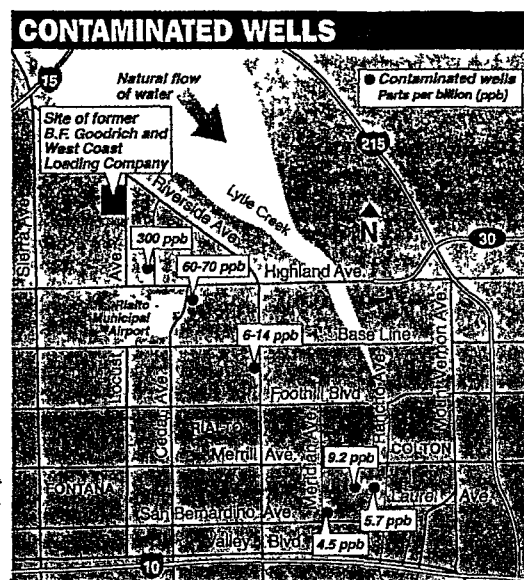
The suspected plume parallels the southeast path of Lytle Creek, prompting environmental agencies to estimate it will continue to move southwest, eventually reaching the Santa Ana River.

Officials said it is moving about an inch a day, which gives them plenty of time to find ways to reverse it.

"It's taken some 40-odd years to get there," said control engineer Kamron Saremi of the water quality board. "It didn't happen overnight."

Responsibility a mystery

Cleanup of San Bernardino County's other perchlorate plume started only after an



Source: California Regional Water Quality Control Board

STAFF GRAPHIC

agreement was reached with the source.

Lockheed Martin Corp. was ordered by the water quality board to clean up Redlands-area wells contaminated by work at a former manufacturing site in Mentone.

The company settled with the city of Redlands for \$3.7 million, and spent more than \$2.5 million replacing wells in Loma Linda. The plume has not been completely eradicated.

Representatives for Goodrich and the former West Coast Loading Co. said they are not prepared to consider cleanup costs or settlement options.

One reason, they said, is they aren't convinced they are at fault.

The Rialto investigation has been hindered by a lack of information to prove who is responsible.

If records were kept by the businesses, Saremi said he hasn't been able to find them. Much of the information he is using has come from a former Goodrich employee who wrote historical articles for the city.

"We don't have a whole lot," he said. "We're taking this every day a step forward."

West Coast Loading, a division of Kwikset Locks Corp., operated at the site from 1950 to 1957, making pistol and parachute flares, which water officials believe included perchlorate in the ingredients.

Goodrich bought the property

in 1957 and used it for propellant research for the Air Force. One of its contracts included work on the Sidewinder missile for the Naval Ordnance Test Station in China Lake, according to files at the water board's Riverside office.

Goodrich sold the property in 1964. Two years later, it was purchased by Boruchin Enterprises. Since 1966, pyrotechnics manufacturers have operated there.

No evidence has pointed to the fireworks operations using perchlorate, so the water board is concentrating its efforts on the first two companies, Saremi said.

Kwikset Locks now operates as Kwikset Corp. An attorney in San Francisco, Robert Wyatt, said the company was aware of the pending cleanup order, but he could not say what will happen.

"The regional board has really provided us with precious little information for why they believe the company is responsible. We've asked them for that information and they've simply been unable to provide any of that," he said.

Goodrich has sent researchers to the site to determine if there is any relationship between the company and the perchlorate. Spokeswoman Patty Meinecke said separate military operations on the site might have played a larger role in the perchlorate than is believed.

There were military bunkers in the area in the 1940s that housed ammunition bound for Long Beach, but Saremi said no

evidence has been provided to show that it might have affected groundwater.

Water concerns

There are 18 known perchlorate plumes in the state, said Kevin Mayer, regional perchlorate coordinator for the Environmental Protection Agency.

Perchlorate migrates rather than naturally degrading. The best method of cleanup is to pump water from affected wells and treat it so it is usable.

Doing so will eventually shrink the plume, although it will continue to move.

"Presumably there will be some dilution as it mixes with clear water," Mayer said. "With water wells that are downstream from the source, that is a real concern."

As the wells shut down, there is concern that water shortages will result. Last week, the Colton City Council approved additional funding to repair other wells to ensure enough water.

Soto said that is one of her primary reasons for getting involved before it is too late.

Peter Fox, Rialto's superintendent of utilities, said the city has assisted the water board in its research and is satisfied with the progress.

Although anxious for resolution, whether it is to clean up the wells or drill new ones, there is no immediate need.

"At this point in time this summer, we believe we will be able to make it through," he said.

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